

## Natural Disasters & Mental Health

Scientific research shows that severe weather happenings such as blizzards, flooding, tornadoes and hurricanes as well as droughts and severe heat waves are likely to occur more often and/or become more intense with climate change.

The impact of a natural disaster is often assessed by a handful of statistics: The number of deaths and injuries; the number of homes and businesses destroyed; the cost of cleanup and repair of damaged homes, streets and other property.

All too often, we overlook the significance of the emotional wreckage these natural disasters leave behind.

Even though a tornado has vanished into thin air and the sirens have stopped, or a torrential downpour of rain has ended and the flooding from it has receded, people continue to feel an immense amount of stress and anxiety related to the natural disaster that occurred in their community. After the headlines to these events swiftly fade from the media spotlight, the loss and grief people are left to cope with remains.

As stated earlier, we know severe climate and weather disasters can cause a considerable amount of stress and hardship for those directly and indirectly impacted by these events. In a recent report from the Lancet Commission on Health and Climate Change, they noted that natural disasters cause anxiety related responses that later on can become and/or lead to chronic and serious mental health disorders.

Here are some common reactions people have during and after a natural disaster has occurred:

- Disbelief & Shock
- Fear and anxiety about the future
- Disoriented & Confused
- Indecisive
- Trouble Concentrating
- Apathy
- Nightmares
- Preoccupied or Reoccurring Thoughts About the Event
- Irritability & Anger
- Sadness & Depression
- Feeling Powerless
- Changes in Eating Habits
- Crying Spells
- Somatic Problems (Headaches, Back Pains and Stomach & Digestive Problems)
- Changes in Sleep Patterns
- Increased Substance Use/Abuse

It should be no wonder that increased behavioral health services are desperately needed in the aftermath of a climate/weather related disaster. Yet the need for these

services is compounded by the mere fact that many of the agencies and people who work in them have also been impacted which causes a disruption in the availability and/or accessibility of these services at a time when there is an increase in needed services.

If your school has a SCIP program, the SCIP team at the school or the regional SCIP coordinator maybe able to help students and families get connected to and coordinate with behavioral health services.

Young kids and teens tend to have greater effects related to natural disasters than adults and are more likely to have prolonged trauma-related symptoms after a disaster. Many kids are resilient and are able to cope and move forward in a healthy manner over time, if they receive the guidance and support they need to develop healthy coping strategies.

Here are some practical and useful tips adults and kids can also use to help them cope with a natural disaster.

- Talk About the Event. Talking with others about the event can help reduce stress and anxiety in knowing you are not alone.
- Spend Time and/or Stay Connected with Your Loved Ones.
- Get Enough Sleep & Rest.
- Exercise & Eat in a Healthy Manner.
- Reduce Caffeine as caffeine can intensify anxious feelings.
- Limit Exposure to Destructive Pictures & News Stories About the Event.
- Make Time for Fun & Healthy Activities, Like Going to a Movie or to the Gym. These can Help Take Your Mind Off the Disaster.
- Do One Thing at a Time. Being able to Check off Things off Your To Do List can Make Things Feel Less Overwhelming.

For more information on related topics of grief, ambiguous loss, depression etc., please visit SCIP's website [www.scipnebraska.com](http://www.scipnebraska.com).

<http://www.brainfacts.org/diseases-and-disorders/mental-health/2018/natural-disasters-take-a-toll-on-mental-health-062818>

[www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/coping-stress-natural-disasters](http://www.mentalhealthamerica.net/conditions/coping-stress-natural-disasters)

<https://www.talkspace.com/blog/cope-mental-health-natural-disasters/>

<https://www.open.edu/openlearn/health-sports-psychology/mental-health/how-do-natural-disasters-affect-mental-health>